A Poet Living in the Big City: Viktor Krivulin, Among Others

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The title of this essay is inspired by a volume of poetry by the American poet Elizabeth Macklin, *A Woman Kneeling in the Big City* (1992). Macklin's city is New York, an urban environment that jostles and demeans, diverts and entrances. Her city has little mythologized sense of history, but a weightier poetic tradition looms over Russian poets living in St. Petersburg. Macklin's posture of a prayerful submissiveness in the context of big city life is not a precise fit for Petersburg poets, but it is enormously suggestive. To kneel, a posture she emphasizes, can be an expression of deference; when this gesture of respect emerges in Petersburg poems, the posture is often less bowed, both physically and psychologically—it is, in fact, mixed with an upright expression of wonder, an act of walking erect through the defamiliarized city. Sometimes, a poet can bow slightly in irony or in deference before towering images of present and past. Kneeling in Macklin's book can also be something other than a willed gesture of submissiveness; rather, it can mark a response to the overwhelming circumstances of life in the city. Kneeling, in fact, becomes a surprising reaction in her poems to New York City's bustling contemporaneity. Humbled, made to feel small, the poet tries to rise to an occasion of speech, and the result can be a gesture beyond respect, something more like endurance. Eternity glimmers back at the face of history at such a moment, and contemporary Petersburg poets, particularly Viktor Krivulin, on whom I will focus, will offer us more than their share of eternity. In analyzing Krivulin's poetry, I will draw on kneeling or submissiveness more as metaphor than as physical reality, although it will be important to note the poems in which Krivulin describes pedestrians as they move through, or pause to contemplate, the city.

My context for understanding Krivulin as a Petersburg poet will be Anna Lisa Crone's and Jennifer Day's excellent study *My Petersburg/Myself*.[1] It shows how poets have written of Petersburg as if it imitated them, rather than the other way around. *My Petersburg/Myself* concentrates on 20th-century figures, from Andrei Belyi to Joseph Brodsky. Brodsky is a very productive endpoint for Crone and Day's account of Russia's fascination with Petersburg, and one wonders how later Soviet and post-Soviet poets will write about the city. Can the models developed in *My Petersburg/Myself* work

[1] Anna Lisa Crone and Jennifer Day, *My Petersburg/Myself: Mental Architecture and Imaginative Space in Modern Russian Letters* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2004).

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for later poets? In particular, what happens to the poetics of identification when the experiences of both subjectivity and history change dramatically? Can the poetics of identification persist in an age when identity itself has come to be experienced so differently? Here I mean to indicate the changes in Russian identity at the collapse of the Soviet Union, and also the earlier, fractured sense of self felt in literature and film after the 1960s, and associated at that time in the West with post-modernism.

One way to re-frame these questions of identity for poets writing after Brodsky is to consider how they react to his work. Viktor Krivulin is particularly interesting in this regard.[2] He aptly recognized "the force of Brodsky's influence upon Leningrad poetry": "anyone starting out to write has had in a way to seek out some kind of counter-version, an opposing figure, as it were."[3] The counter-figure looms up, I want to argue, between poets and their city, and it is a figure in several senses: a rhetorical trope, a person-like shape, a spirit conjured from poetry of the past. For Krivulin, the most haunting specter is that of Osip Mandelshtam, as he was for Brodsky. Krivulin's ghosts rise from the poet's (and the city's) unconscious, and they appear visibly in the context of aesthetic mediation I will trace in this essay.

Contemporary Petersburg poets have also had recourse to some alternative myths for the city. Here I will draw on the perspective taken in Julie Buckler's *Mapping St. Petersburg: Imperial Text and Cityshape* (2005), which focuses on 19th-century prose. She argues that the cultural map of St. Petersburg turns on the "plural literary space of the cultural middle" and portrays "the city in terms of alternate literary trajectories, in-between spaces, and outer edges."[4] Buckler shows us not just the peripheries that contrast the imperial center, but the middle terrain where both possibilities register, often on a consciousness that absorbs the mixed message with difficulty. That split in the psyche yields a sense of connection but also conflict with the surrounding world.

How history and psyche come together is one of the great themes in the Petersburg tradition. Crone and Day find that Petersburg is historicized in some poems, but in others it defies historical reality; some poets reach for a unified, holistic connection of identity and urban space, whereas others create

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[2] As a poet and as a critic, Krivulin here charts a revealing middle course. He challenged Brodsky's sense of himself as the "last poet," however alluring that self-image might be, particularly as a poet ages and feels "the abyss breathing down his neck." Viktor Krivulin, *Okhota na Mamonta* (St. Petersburg: Russko-Baltiiskii informatsionnyi tsentr BLITs, 1998), 10. Here and subsequently, all translations from Russian are mine.

[3] Valentina Polukhina, ed., *Brodsky through the Eyes of His Contemporaries* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 179. Krivulin's interview is all of great interest (pp. 176–99).

[4] Julie A. Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg: Imperial Text and Cityshape* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 25–26.

insistently broken connections. Crone and Day show many scenarios for this encounter, including strategies to reverse time and deny its impact; an identification with the dying city in piercing elegies; and collages of the city's buildings and its rivers only to create a self "held together by Petersburg alone."[5] Krivulin builds the transcendental work of poetic creation onto the physical map of the city. He sees the city in apocalyptic terms, and the city seems capacious both spatially and temporally, even when its spaces come crowding around a vulnerable poet. Krivulin lived in the city almost his entire life. He arrived as a young child, a transition he records in the poem "At the Public Celebration" ("Na prazdnike narodnom"),[6] and he died there in 2002.

Krivulin's extensive writing has yet to receive anything like adequate critical treatment, despite a spate of appreciative obituaries and a few illuminating essays on his poetry.[7] He is without question a major figure in late 20th-century Russian poetry, and he is a self-consciously Petersburg poet. His poetry often turns to motifs from the city's spaces and its history. He has written on the myths and challenges of life in Petersburg in his splendid book of prose, *Hunting the Wooly Mammoth* (*Okhota na Mamonta*, 1998), and I will draw on this volume to create a context for approaching his poetry. Particularly interesting is his sense of the city's spaces as taking on meaning because of the discursive practices they have generated. Monuments become an organic part of the city only because of the verbal envelopes that surround them. This envelope may be comprised of scandals or criticism. Krivulin creates a correspondence between the building blocks of words in a language and the building stone used for the statue: in the end, he writes, a monument is made of words that have solidified into visible form ("zastyvshee slovo").[8] Crone and Day's model of a poet who writes of the city as if it imitated him makes sense for Krivulin, then, but with a slight adjustment: the city does not imitate the poet's personality, it imitates his essential work, which is to make a world out of words.

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[5] Crone and Day, *My Petersburg/Myself*, 140.

[6] Krivulin, *Kontsert po zaiavkam* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Fonda russkoi poezii, 2001), 10.

[7] In addition to the essays and obituaries mentioned below, see Andrei Ar'ev, "Na iazyke svoem proshchal'nom," *Zvezda*, no. 5 (2001): 236–38, which compares Krivulin to Blok in stature and in ability to sum up a generation of poetic achievement; a group of short remembrances in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 52 (2001): 230–52; Irena Luksic, "Vremia nastupilo: Shmon Viktora Krivulina," *Russian Literature* 51: 3 (April 2002): 273–93; and Clint Walker, "The Spirit(s) of the Leningrad Underground: Viktor Krivulin's Communion with Russian Modernism," *SEEJ* 43: 4 (Winter 1999): 674–98. Walker's article is a close reading of one of Krivulin's most influential and significant early poems, "I drink the wine of archaisms" ("P'iu vino arkhaizmov").

[8] Krivulin, *Okhota na Mamonta*, 88–89.

Krivulin evokes a relationship to the city that is surprisingly domestic, but his image of home is filled with books rather than pots and pans.[9] If monuments are made of congealed words, then buildings or city squares also seem to stand forth metonymically in the shape of books. Books and architectural facades melt into a single experiential entity, as in this passage from *Okhota na mamonta*:

> The street, the embankment, the square, for some all books—these gradually were transformed into our real Home. And of course the palaces, refashioned as government museums and therefore belonging to no one, they, too, became ours. […] The theatrical luxury of facades, which we had appropriated to ourselves, were a kind of compensation for the poverty in which we were reared.[10]

Krivulin confirms the separation of private domestic worlds from public, post-imperial space, but he experiences that larger, grander public space as if he owned it. He gains not a private sense of individual identity but rather a collective mood of belonging to something larger than himself. That mood defends against the alienation that pervades much of the writing of his generation, and it is a telling paradox for many of these poets and particularly for Krivulin that their work recounts a feeling of solitude that is not debilitating or even very isolating.

The city, in other words, pushes the poet further into himself and offers him a safeguard against extreme solitude. Krivulin explores what it means to grow up in this city, and his analysis is psychological (here, a compensatory structure where public grandeur makes up for the indignities of daily life lived essentially in poverty) as much as it is historical. He writes:

> I began writing verses at the end of the 1950s because the world around me was impoverished, squalid, and ugly. I spent my childhood in a communal apartment, transformed from a huge suite of rooms in a nobleman's living quarters, typical of Petersburg, into an overpopulated Soviet dormitory.… I belong to the first post-catastrophic generation, whose pathos may be defined as spiritually archaic, for precisely to us belongs the dubious yet true honor of first discovering under the layer of ashes of Leningrad that city that, while

[9] Compare Brodsky's striking 1987 elegy in memory of his mother, which is (to my mind) perhaps his finest Petersburg poem. In his translation, "What can remain of a mother with all her saucepans/ in the perspective daily extended by her son's progress?" (Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, trans. by or with the author; including translations by Jonathan Aaron et al., ed. Ann Kjellberg [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000], 341); in Russian: "Gde tam materi i ee kastriuliam / utselet' v perspektive, udliniaemoi zhizn'iu syna!" (Brodskii, *Sochineniia*, 6 vols. to date [St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 1998], 4: 26).

[10] Krivulin, *Okhota na Mamonta*, 51.

> already semi-transparent, still possesses a magnetic and more real reality (forgive the involuntary redundancy).[11]

Elsewhere, Krivulin has explained the "more real reality" in contrast to daily life, where material needs go unmet:

> Cold and impoverished Leningrad, however, was full of meanings and myths—but it could not let anyone know them. It was afraid to speak. Everything that could have been spoken had already been said, in its existence as Petropol—now, there was nothing new, nothing visible. The city preferred not to repeat itself, but it could not remain silent. It indulged in ellipses.[12]

The "meanings and myths" of the city are what matters, then, but they can only be found in the spaces of absences.[13] Krivulin finds clues about Petersburg in architectural structures, but also in elements of the natural world. Describing his work on the poetry volume *Concert on Demand* (*Kontsert po zaiavkam*, 2001), he has written:

> This book arose from the speculative, ideal landscape of Petersburg, which remains enchanting because beyond or behind it one senses a constant verbal and semantic pressure, a hidden rustling of a certain organizing creative will. And the point of application of this distant force turns out to be not only man-made structures like palaces or urban ensembles, but also the elemental forces of nature in spite of whose inhospitable confluence Petersburg nonetheless arose.[14]

Krivulin blurs the boundaries between cultural institutions and nature's processes here, between what was built by human will and what can be destroyed by nature. His notion of history includes all these elements. In summing up Krivulin's achievements as a poet, the Moscow poet Ol'ga

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[11] Krivulin, "Poetry in the Sunset of the Empire," trans. Gary Kern, in *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry*, ed. Kent Johnson and Stephen M. Ashby (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 235–36.

[12] Krivulin, "Okhota na mamonta," afterword to Krivulin, *Kontsert po zaiavkam*, 101. Although this short essay has the same title as the prose volume *Okhota na Mamonta*, it is not included in that volume. The title is clearly one that Krivulin found productive: see also the excellent short poem of the same title, Krivulin, *Kontsert po zaiavkam*, 11.

[13] An eloquent expression of this allegory between absence and self-definition occurs in Krivulin's poem "4'33" (Dzhon Keidzh, disk 'Sailens')"/ "4'33" (John Cage, 'Silence')." Although this poem takes Cage's musical composition, where silence for a prescribed period of time substitutes for notes played, as its point of departure, it is an intensely visual poem for nearly all of its metaphors, using an allegory of portraiture for Krivulin's entire generation. See Krivulin, *Obrashchenie* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', Leningradskoe otdelenie, 1990), 46–47.

[14] Krivulin, "Okhota na mamonta," *Kontsert po zaiavkom*, 98.

Sedakova perceptively noted that his muse was Clio, and his poetry was open to all experience—nothing was "other" in his poetic world.[15] He wrote post-catastrophic history, or history as prophecy, Sedakova says, and in writing in this apocalyptic mode Krivulin was comparable, in her view, only to Elena Shvarts. Note the relative freedom with which Krivulin moves among temporal realms, for that mobility gives his representations of Petersburg a quality at once revelatory and haunting. It is for this reason that Sedakova called his poetry a form of "metaphysical journalism."[16]

I want to draw on one last metaphor before turning to the poetry itself. The world of Krivulin's poetry is a snapshot of a present reality but with layers of temporal mists clouding and complicating all that is shown. I choose this metaphor from photography deliberately, with an eye to Krivulin's high praise for the photographs of Boris Smelov (1952–98), who aimed to "put onto film not the reality that was, but the more than real Petersburg, the one populated by the characters of Dostoevsky's novels *The Idiot* or *Crime and Punishment*." Smelov showed the "most treasured and most original face of the city," Krivulin found. Smelov's photographs seemed to him to obey the laws of versification: "strict, enticing rhythm was barely felt in the alternation of light and dark; the roof lines and embankments rhyme in an visible, fantastical manner."[17] It would be interesting, in fact, to pursue an analysis of Smelov's work in the context of the literary approaches we have to the Petersburg myth; on the basis of the few examples of his work that I have seen, I suspect that Smelov himself contributed to and shaped the received wisdom of Petersburg as a city of distinctive personalities, shadowy architecture, and ghosts both human and metaphysical.[18] The approach taken to Smelov's photographs offers us as well a way to see Krivulin's own intensely visual poems, and it will give me occasion in a moment to compare his poems to cinema. Krivulin's search for the "more than real Petersburg" turns out to be the Petersburg shaped by its literary legacy, but the reality is more broadly cultural than it is specifically located in words and their meanings.

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[15] Ol'ga Sedakova, "Pamiati Viktora Krivulina," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 52 (2001): 236–42.

[16] Ol'ga Sedakova, "Ocherki drugoi poezii: Ocherk pervyi. Viktor Krivulin," in Sedakova, *Proza* (Moscow: NFQ/ To Print, 2001), 702.

[17] Krivulin, *Okhota na mamonta*, 177–78.

[18] I have not been able to find published images from Smelov's work, but there are a number of examples of his work on the internet, some exceptionally expressive and beautiful in the ways that Krivulin describes. See http://privalov.frinet.org/a/smelov.htm for a picture of Smelov and eight of his photographs; see also http://www.mdf.ru/search/authors/smelov/ and http://www.photorussia.com/smelovpics.htm for especially fine images.

In writing of Petersburg, Krivulin can direct attention to known monuments and locales, as in his poems from the early 1970s on the city's canals.[19] I turn instead to what might seem an unlikely choice as a "Petersburg poem," because I am more interested in Krivulin's work of filtering urban elements through a different cultural medium.[20] This poem, "Gobelin Tapestries" ("Gobeleny," 1972), presents us with an artifact from the visual arts, making it an instance of ekphrasis. Smelov's photographs are themselves visual representations of the seen world, but in this poem, Krivulin places us at a still further remove, offering words that create the illusion of vision. Photographs freeze the action of an ever-moving world, and part of their illusion is the capacity to suggest movement with stilled images. Ekphrasis has this capacity as well, and this poem will also introduce us to a crucial balance that Krivulin's poetry often seeks, that between stillness and dynamism.[21] The words work very hard to shape an imagined entity, to turn it into the alternative form of discourse mentioned in the poem's first two words ("inoe slovo"). The words also seek to crowd out the alternative images—of poverty, of the forces that diminish one's sense of being alive and human—that Krivulin describes in his prose. The poem is not short, but it merits quoting in full.

Гобелены
Иное слово, и цветные стекла,
чужие розы витражей…
На гобеленах времени поблекла
гирлянда бледная длинноволосых фей.

[19] "Obvodnyi Kanal," "V Ekaterinskom kanale," and "Kanal Griboedova," Krivulin, *Stikhi*, 2 vols. (Leningrad–Paris: Beseda, 1988), 1: 38–40.

[20] The creation of cultural filters also shows the fundamentally elegiac nature of Krivulin's poetry. One of his main sources for this elegiac strain is the poetry of Osip Mandelshtam (the other is that of Evgenii Baratynskii). Krivulin writes about his keen response to Baratynskii in *Okhota na Mamonta* (7). On Mandelshtam's massive presence in modern Russian poetry, he has written compellingly and at length. Of particular interest is the contrast he draws between the absorption of Mandelshtam's poetry on metaphysical terms in Leningrad as opposed to the elements of Russian Orthodoxy that were more important to Moscow poets. In Moscow, Nadezhda Mandelshtam's influence was decisive in this Orthodox trend, he argues, whereas, in Leningrad, the literary-philosophical direction showed the guiding hand of Lidiia Ginzburg (ibid., 186–99).

[21] See Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), for a rich discussion of the trope of ekphrasis, whereby artifacts from the visual arts are introduced into literary texts. Among his points of emphasis is the capacity of ekphrasis to slow down or stop narrative and lyric movement. Krieger includes his influential 1967 essay, "*Ekphrasis* and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laokoön* Revisited" in this volume (263–88).

Засох венок. Но были бы живыми –
все не жили бы здесь,
где платьев синий пар в серозеленом дыме
неразличим – уходит с ветром весь ...

Музейных инструментов мусикии
волноподобные тела
звучали бы для нас, как мертвые куски
когда-то цельного поющего стекла ...

Как хорошо, как тихо и просторно
частицей медленной волны
существовать не здесь – но в море иллюзорном,
каким живые, мы, окружены.

Когда фабричных труб горюют кипарисы,
в зеленых лужицах виясь, –
весь город облаков, разросшийся и сизый –
вот остров мой, и родина, и власть.

И связь моя, чем призрачней, тем крепче,
чем протяженней – тем сильней ...
К тому клонится слух, что еле слышно шепчет, –
к молчанию времен, каналов и камней.

К тому клонится дух, чьи выцветшие нити
связуют паутиной голубой
и трепет бабочки, и механизм событий,
войну и лютню, ветер и гобой.

Так бесконечно жизнь подобна коридору,
где шторы темные шпалер
скрывают Божий мир, необходимый взору ...
Да что за окнами? Простенок ли? барьер?

Лишь приблизительные бледные созданья,
колеблемые воздухом своим,
по стенам движутся – лишь мука ожиданья
разлуку с нами скрашивает им.

Так бесконечно жизнь подобна перемене
застывших туч или холмов,
длинноволосых фей, упавших на колени
над кубиками черствыми домов ...

Так хорошо, что радость узнаванья
тоску утраты оживит,

что невозвратный свет *л*юбви и *л*юбованья
когда не существует – предстоит.[22]

Gobelin Tapestries

Another word, and colored bits of glass,
foreign roses in a window ...
On the tapestries of time, the pale garland
of the fairy with long tresses has faded.

The wreath has dried. But were they alive,
all these things would not be living here,
here where the blue steam of clothing, impossible to make out
in the gray-green smoke, disappears with the wind…

The wave-like bodies of instruments
from museums would make their music
for us, like the dead shards
of a once intact singing glass…

How good it is that the world disappears into memory,
but it returns as a dream, transformed –
with lips turned white
and a voice that sounds like silence.

How good it is, how silent and spacious
for a slow wave, like a tiny particle,
to exist somewhere that is not here—
in an illusory sea that surrounds the living, us.

When the cypress trees, like factory pipes, grieve aloud
and twist themselves into little green puddles,—
the whole city of clouds, grown thick and gray—
there's my island, my motherland and its power.

And my tie to all this grows stronger as it becomes more spectral,
it fills itself with strength the more it stretches out…
One's ear leans in to hear the barely audible whisper,
the silence of time, of canals and stones.

The spirit leans in toward threads past their bloom
that tie with blue spider web
the quiver of the butterfly, the mechanism of events,
war and lute, wind and oboe.

[22] Krivilun, *Stikhi*, 1: 80–81.

And so life endlessly resembles a corridor
where the dark shutters of the trellis
conceal the divine world, so necessary to our gaze ...
What can that be beyond the windows: space between walls? a barrier?

Only the approximated pale creations,
who waver on their own air,
move across the walls—only the torture of waiting
makes their separation from us easier.

And so life endlessly resembles change
in clouds or hills frozen into solidity,
in fairies with long tresses who fell to their knees
just above the stale little blocks of these buildings…

And so it is good that the joy of recognition
brings the anguish of loss to life,
and it is good that the irrevocable light of love and admiration,
when it does not yet exist, is still to come.

This poem is written deeply in the spirit of Mandelshtam's poetry, particularly that of his first two books, *Stone* (*Kamen'*, 1913) and *Tristia* (1922). The "joy of recognition" in the final stanza quotes Mandelshtam's poem "I have forgotten the word I wanted to say" ("Ia slovo pozabyl, chto ia khotel skazat'," 1920).[23] A subtler connection to Mandelstam also emerges in the poem's elegiac intonation and in the use of artifacts to evoke a past aesthetic world (compare the Gobelin tapestry to Mandelshtam's enamels and porcelain in "On pale blue enamel" ("Na bledno-goluboi email," 1912).[24] For Mandelshtam, the ability of the living to listen for the meanings of absent civilizations is what makes us fundamentally human, but Krivulin is more interested in contrasting what is alive with what is dead. In his world, absence aches so sharply that there is little space for the "nostalgia for world

[23] There are hints of other poems from that period: the words "*ozhidan'e*" and "*razluka*" in close proximity (stanza 10) call to mind Mandelshtam's "Tristia," as does the description of the fairies as "*dlinnovolosyi*" ("with long tresses"); compare "unbraided" ("*prostovolosyi*") in "Tristia." Osip Mandel'shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza* (Moscow: Folio, 2001), 73.

[24] Krivulin's use of the tapestry also makes this poem a kind of translation across art forms, an aspect of the work that has been described well by Michael Molnar in "Translation as Inspiration in Recent Russian Poetry," *Russian Literature* 36: 3 (1994): 347–52. Molnar writes briefly but illuminatingly about a series of poems Krivulin wrote about works of art, "Gallery" ("Galereia," in *Stikhi*, 2: 118–31), and his comments are based on a comparison of Krivulin's cycle of poems with the Cynthia poems of Elena Shvarts.

culture" that Mandelshtam made famous. Instead, Krivulin struggles against the emptiness and disharmony of the present.

Perhaps that is why, early in the poem, the seemingly stilled images are not dead to the poet's imagination. On the contrary, stanzas 2–3 ask where the tapestry figures would be were they to come alive, and we read of how the musical instruments might sound were they to be audible. Were the instruments to resound, their notes would be "dead shards" of glass, and were the people to come to life they could not live "here," where wind would carry away the visible signs of being. And so it is not surprising that the poem includes images of death, like the cypress trees, an emblem of death in Greek culture, and an image found in Mandelshtam's poetry, for example in "Of dark and fruitless Venetian life" ("Venetseiskoi zhizni, mrachnoi i besplodnoi," 1920), a poem that makes its presence felt in the images of glass in "Gobelin Tapestries."[25] At the end of the poem, it is life itself which the poet tries to describe in figurative language, and his tropes mix a sense of stasis and change, of obscurity and revelation. The "fairies with long tresses" come alive from the tapestry "here" fall to their knees, and they do so as if in the place of the poet. They kneel in a scene that is strangely like the big city. They are brought into the "now" of diminished buildings (the "kubiki cherstvye domov" suggest a contrast of proportions, as we might find in tapestries or old paintings, where people are larger than buildings; they also suggest rows of newly built Soviet buildings with their stale architecture).

Those buildings evoke Petersburg, although not of the recognizably imperial sort. The city's working neighborhoods contrast oddly with grieving cypress trees; the poem pushes that typical elegiac image into an unfamiliar contemporary urban environment. The metonymy of shape and emitted sound works, but it conveys a discomfort with those safely old images. That same anxiety is evoked in other images for the city, particularly the city of clouds, as Petersburg has been called (stanza 6). The clouds congeal into a fixed form just as cypress trees "twist themselves into little green puddles." Both recall the way in which Krivulin described the city's monuments as coagulated words ("*zastyvshee slovo*") **<<shouldn't this be given in plural?>>**. The physical consolidation of what in nature should be discrete or ungraspable gives this urban environment its own sense of agency. This is the world which returns "as a dream" after it has disappeared "into memory" (stanza 4), which is to say that the past cannot ever fully recede. The poem's evocation of the distant ancient world as a tapestry and an aesthetic object mark "Gobelin Tapestries" as a Petersburg poem. In writing about Petersburg poetry, Krivulin emphasized its spiritual quality.[26] To write the city, he shows us, is to write its spirit as well as its material substance.

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[25] Mandel'shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia. Proza*, 76.

[26] Krivulin, "Peterburgskaia spiritual'naia lirika vchera i segodnia (K istorii neofitsial'noi poezii Leningrada 60–80-kh godov)," *Istoriia leningradskoi nepodtsenzurnoi*

I turn to a second poem now, one that sustains the fascination with spirit and matter. Here, the realia of the city are palpably shown, but a fantasy of the future has replaced the dream of the past. As early as the poem's first line, with its reference to place names, the poet asks how language can remain commensurate with a changed world. This untitled poem dates to 1979.

Когда придет пора менять названья
центральных площадей
и воздуха единственное знамя
живыми складками пойдет –

какие люди явятся тогда?
какое облако людей?
какой народ?

болотный край – утопия в разливе
и острая трава
торчит воинственней и сиротливей
чем адмиральский шпиц

полузатопленные острова
следы цивилизации морской
развалины земных столиц
когда оно придет – какое выраженье
отпечатлеется на всех
спешащих кашляющих кутающих шею
опаздывающих ко звонку? –

подъем воды? переворот правленья?…
но общий неподъемный грех
как новоспущенный корабль
скрежещет днищем по песку[27]

When the time comes to change the names
of the central squares

literatury: 1950–1980-e gody, ed. B. I. Ivanov and B. A. Roginskii (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo "Dean," 2000), 99–109.

[27] Cited from Krivulin, *Okhota na mamonta* (53–54), where it is the lead poem for the chapter on a "Spring Time Walk Along Nevsky" (chap. 3). I have made one change in this poem, taking out the all-capitalized "ONO" in l. 15, which appears in no other version and seems to me a simple typographical mistake. Textological principles for working with Krivulin's poetry await the work of scholars. In their absence, I choose the latest version corrected by the poet. For an earlier version of this poem, with some stanzas combined and with different punctuation, see Krivulin, *Stikhi* (Paris: Ritm, 1981), 53; and *Stikhi*, 2 vols. (Leningrad–Paris: Beseda, 1988), 2: 45; of these, the latter strikes me as the more successful.

and when the one and only banner of air
will unfold with its living syllables

what kind of persons will appear then?
what cloud of people?
what kind of *narod*?

the edge of a swamp is a utopia overflowing its banks
and pointed blades of grass
stick up more aggressively and more like orphans
than the needle of the admiral

the half-flooded islands
the traces of the sea's civilization
the ruins of earthly capitals

what it comes, what kind of expression
will be imprinted on the faces of all
those scurrying coughing wrapping up their throats
hurrying to be on time?

will the water rise? will there be a coup d'état?
but the shared and unbearably heavy sin
like a ship just set to sea
scrapes its bottom on the sand

Petersburg appears here in both its high and low emblematic variants: the Admiralty's needle rises up, and below we have the swamps and islands, the low-lying landmass that makes Petersburg vulnerable to natural disaster. The "scurrying coughing" people are sickly in a familiar way: recall the "swollen glands of childhood" and streetlights that gave off a hazy light the color of cod liver oil in Mandelshtam's poem about the city.[28]

In asking what the future people of the city will look like, Krivulin self-consciously raises the question of finding a counter-spirit that was quietly present in "Gobelin Tapestries." Objects rise up in this flat urban environment, whether it be people hurrying along, pointed blades of grass, or the Admiralty's needle. The poem cannot rhetorically let go of the syntax of questioning, asking over and over what those figures will mean in an unnamed future. And naming is itself held up for scrutiny, with no sense that names ought to have permanence. It is as if nothing belonged to the city's rulers or its populace with the kind of unchanging ownership that more fixed names would suggest.

[28] Mandel'shtam, "Ia vernulsia v moi gorod, znakomyi do slez," *Stikhotvoreniia, Proza*, 166.

The instability of names makes language itself stop knowing how to perform: rather than substituting new terms for old, or new symbols for old, the poet imagines instead that "the one and only banner of air/ will unfold with its living syllables." Of the new names, we know only that they have two properties, neither of them connoting permanence. They are written on a banner made of air ("vozdukha edinstvennoe znamia"), a strange mix of absolute value—the *only* banner—with the ungraspable materiality of air. And, in another paradox, they are "living syllables," which makes them vivid, connected to the ongoing salutary processes of life in a way that is not true of the presumably deadened syllables of the old names. But the new names are also made subject to decay and death by virtue of being alive. Here, condensed into a single image, natural and manmade history are joined by Krivulin, and once again he makes the word his measure for a much larger process of cultural and organic change. The poem works that theme of organic change through its other images, for this is not merely the landscape of the present: there are traces of past civilizations and of "the ruins of earthly capitals," as if the visible present were the relic of a social structure that has collapsed. The references to two threats, natural and political, come together in the last stanza, but the impetus for the poem's fantasy of a different future world comes from human change. When the names of public places change, the social order will also not be the same. Krivulin's question is what kind of people will inhabit that new world.

Written in 1979, this poem cannot yet bear witness to the changes that were to come when Leningrad was transformed into St. Petersburg barely a dozen years later.[29] Yet the poet seems to know that a new set of names will bring with it a radical change in the way people feel as they go about their daily business. In fact, during the era of Glasnost, Krivulin wrote poems that reflected almost prosaically the advent of a new way of seeing the world: he entitled this group of poems "New Vision" ("Novoe zrenie"), and treated such topics as the common obsession with watching television for political and cultural news.[30] Yet Krivulin's poems and prose mostly swerve away

[29] The same strange prescience is felt in a poem in Elizabeth Macklin's 1992 book: "A Woman at Ground Zero," *A Woman Kneeling in the Big City* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 16. Macklin cannot have known that the name "Ground Zero" would in a decade almost exclusively come to signify the space left by the destruction of the World Trade Center's twin towers. Her poem describes a process of excavation and projected future that, while rhetorically and intonationally quite different from the work of Krivulin, is epistemologically remarkably similar.

[30] Krivulin, *Stikhi*, 2: 134–41. See also poems in "Stikhi vesny 1987" (142–45), particularly one expressive example (p. 143), which features a compact renovation of imagery familiar from the pastoral newly associated with urban neglect rather than rural pleasures. That same turn is found in "Cemetery for Mail Trucks" ("Kladbishche pochtovykh furgonov," 1994), in Krivulin, *Stikhi posle stikhov* (St. Petersburg: Russko-Baltiiskii informatsionnyi tsentr BLITs, 2001), 94, but the model for this revision of the

from the details of daily life, past or present, in order to reflect on more enigmatic aspects of experience. That is why Sedakova found him to be the poet most deeply marked by a relation to history of anyone in their generation—his muse, she said, is Clio—but she added that his way of thinking about history was always "fully realized, fully thought through, and utterly defamiliarized" ("osoznannaia, otreflektirovannaia, otstranennaia").[31]

To defamiliarize the past is to show how the present is always defamilarized as well, and one way Krivulin does that is in his treatments of monuments, those objects whose role is to perform the work of memory and to transform sites of daily life into rites of temporal passage. Among Krivulin's many comments about Petersburg monuments, he is at his best in writing about Mikhail Shemiakin's "Sphinx," a grotesque and less colossal rendition of the Egyptian monument set before Kresty prison in St. Petersburg. Krivulin reads the monument's visual symbolism without shattering its insistently mysterious qualities, and he praises Shemiakin's ability to make the very air around the monument seem tense with self-conscious commentary on Russia's history and its present state.[32]

It is worth pausing to consider which history matters in such defamiliarizing moments. Shemiakin pays homage to victims of the Soviet Terror, yet it is fair to say that little in the poetry of Krivulin—or, for that matter, in the work of most poets after Anna Akhmatova's daunting *Requiem* (*Rekviem*, 1935–40)—approaches the topic of the Terror. In his prose, Krivulin insists that Leningrad paid a high price in the persecution of its intelligentsia, but in his poetry, we read more usually of the imperial past or more recent Soviet experience. Occasionally he mentions the Blockade, which may be the historical experience that most particularizes Leningrad (in the way that Peter's founding most particularizes Petersburg). How one thinks about the Blockade, however, is complicated by its official substitution for the more unmentionable experience of the Terror in official Soviet rhetoric, but such cant was no obstacle for poets and writers of the underground who were intent on writing about the Blockade. Examples would include Lidiia Ginzburg's *Blockade Diary* (*Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka*, 1942–1962–1983), and Elena Shvarts's poem "Portrait of the Blockade via Genre, Still Life, and

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pastoral is in the work of Elena Shvarts, for example, "Kindergarten After Thirty Years" ("Detskii sad cherez tridtsat' let") or "The Garbage Dump" ("Svalka"). See Shvarts, *Sochineniia*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 2002), 1: 234–35; 171–72.

[31] Sedakova, "Ocherki drugoi poezii," 689.

[32] Krivulin, *Okhota na Mamonta*, 104–10. Krivulin praises the monument especially because Shemiakin "has organically inscribed the monument into the city's panorama, introducing into it elements of the latest tragic travesty and seemingly exposing the bloody, carnivalesque basis of the very idea of tyrannical power, of the unconscious nature of a dictatorship that put the majority of the Russian population on the boundary between life and death" (106).

Landscape Painting" ("Portret blokady cherez zhanr, natiurmort i peizazh").[33] Both these texts testify to the continuing, disruptive force of the Blockade in all historical thinking about Leningrad/ Petersburg and its myths.

A more telling instance, for the purposes of studying Krivulin, of an almost unwilled but powerfully meaningful turn to the Blockade occurs in Aleksandr Sokurov's film *The Russian Ark* (*Russkii kovcheg*, 2002). About a third of the way into that film, the camera and the Marquis stumble into a room in the Hermitage in which corpses were stored during the Blockade (and, in the film's magical collapse of chronology, dead bodies are still stored in the dimly lit, cold underground room). The coffin maker is that rare historical figure who speaks his experiences directly to the camera in the film, and the entire brief episode stands as a kind of rupture of the unconscious from deep in the foundation of the glittering imperial building that *The Russian Ark* principally explores. Death itself seems to speak back to the camera in this brief scene, a dreadful reminder of disaster and loss amid a film's larger project of bringing a historical past of celebration and ritual to life in the museum.

I bring in *The Russian Ark* as an example because Krivulin, like Sokurov, is largely focused on the imperial past of Russia, rather than its 20th-century fate, and in both cases this moment has powerfully disruptive potential that must be contained. In a poem that mentions the Blockade, "At the Public Festival," Krivulin says tersely that the Blockade has "ended, it has been lived through" ("proshla, perezhita").[34] In that doubled iteration of an ending, Krivulin uses the repetition to create the sense of stumbling, of a historical experience that one must doubly describe as completed. The metaphor of stumbling comes from the poem itself, which refers to the poet as coming to the city to have his own legs healed as a child. And yet the city is no healer of legs, which we know from Krivulin's lifelong difficulty in walking and, in "At the Public Festival," from a reference to the city as having rid itself of all who could not walk:

> мне повезло в отличие от многих:
> родители меня больного привезли
> в Столицу Бывшую откуда всех безногих
> неслышно вывезли на самый край земли[35]

[33] Lidiia Ginzburg, *Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka*, in *Literatura v poiskakh real'nosti* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), 334–92; a translation into English has appeared: *Blockade Diary*, trans. Alan Myers (London: Harvill Press, 1995); Elena Shvarts, *Dikopis' poslednego vremeni* (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 2001), 46–48.

[34] Krivulin, *Kontsert po zaiavkam*, 10.

[35] Ibid.

I was lucky, unlike so many others:
my parents brought me, a sick child,
to the Former Capital, from which all those without legs
had been silently removed to the very edges of the earth

To describe the city as having extruded those who could not walk, and to describe himself as a lucky exception to that cruel exclusion, is for Krivulin to mark himself as imaginatively able—despite the physical challenges he faced as someone for whom the simple act of walking was difficult—to comprehend the city in the way one most deeply absorbs any urban space, by walking through it. The postures of walking, leaning, standing, or otherwise moving through the physical space of the city informs some of his best Petersburg poems, "In Catherine's Canal" ("V Ekaterininskom kanale") among them.[36] Leaning is also the posture taken twice in a "Gobelin Tapestries," by the "ear" that "leans to hear the barely audible whisper," and by the "spirit" that "leans in toward threads past their bloom." I take leaning to be a meaningful variant on bowing, one that is less stilled into concentration, something closer to dynamic movement. The act of leaning is like a gesture in the direction of walking—it is the moment when one inclines toward a desired object but without actually moving the legs—and, in these texts, it is performed by an entity with diminished mobility, perhaps as a reference to Krivulin's own difficulty in walking. In "Gobelin Tapestries," "ear" and "spirit" are meant as substitutes for the psyche. Physical movement is better undertaken by the people one watches in the city, and so, in "When the time comes to change the names," the "scurrying coughing wrapping up their throats" inhabitants of the city are shown traversing the city's open spaces, the very squares and streets whose names are subject to change. These pedestrians, in their rush to move through the urban space without catching its diseases, are like the alienated beings Walter Benjamin made famous as the markers of modernity in 19th-century Paris: they were "self-estranged" people, fortified in their alienation "against the reified world."[37]

Krivulin's poems offer these "self-estranged" people as physically present and as barely graspable spirits. He seems to doubt the reality of all such fantasies, and, in "Gobelin Tapestries," he asks what can be beyond the

[36] Krivulin, *Obrashchenie*, 10. See also the untitled poem about pedestrians and their shadows which also appears early in this volume: "pedestrians compete with their shades" (est' peshekhoda s ten'iu sostiazan'e, 8).

[37] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 322. For an illuminating discussion of this passage, and of the relationship between the "self-estranged human being" and "its productivity," see Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 94–119; my two quoted phrases come from p. 96.

windows. When the shadows of ghostly creatures are seen within a room, they are nearly intangible. "Only the approximate pale creations,/ which waver on their own air,/ move across the walls." We are back in Plato's cave, the world known only by the shadows of unseen figures. Krivulin's Petersburg is a city of spirits and traces, but in that intense absence, elements from the cultural past of St. Petersburg come to him unbidden. He finds it possible to glimpse the eternal. In a way he cannot have known, he is enacting the same balance that Sokurov sought in *The Russian Ark*. That film ends with the consolatory observation, as the camera shows a misty image of the river beyond a window, "We are destined to sail forever. And to live forever" (I plyt' nam vechno. I zhit' vechno). Making "forever" the last word of a film marks its ending as an assertion of the eternal against all odds. Sokurov hopes to hedge his bets in favor of these eternal verities by giving his film its own aura of endlessness, not least by the formal decision to make a movie with no cuts at all.

Like Sokurov, Krivulin imparts to his poetry the feel of endlessly flowing lines of verse by his decision in his later work to eliminate most marks of punctuation. Can the illusion of the eternal succeed? Sokurov seems to acknowledge tacitly that it cannot, if only by his film's prolonged scene of exit: the wish not to have to end the film turns into a lengthened process of departure, which intensifies the elegiac quality of the ending. Sokurov betrays his desire to postpone the ending, but Krivulin does not particularly mark his poems' endings as anxious or unwilled. What erupts into the poems, however, does have that capacity to disturb a poem's surface; elements from the cultural past of St. Petersburg seem to come to him unbidden, as if the myth of Petersburg were creating his self-projection as a poet, rather than his poetry contributing to the city's ongoing myths and fantasies.

What is his reaction to these visitations? I began with the image of a poet kneeling in the big city, an image that has been tempered in the course of this essay by more dynamic physical acts like walking or the contemplation of such walking, in the form of leaning. The attitude toward the city is ambivalent, at once a wish to project the image of a poet onto an urban environment that itself seems to be made by words, and a fear that the city will make all consolidation of the self impossible. Krivulin's strategy in the face of this ambivalence is a retreat into different temporal registers, where eternity holds out the promise of mental and spiritual escape. And yet it is always only a promise. As much as the ship scraping a sandy bottom weighs down the ending of "When the time comes to change the names," it offers the chance of escape, an attenuated rewriting of the ship fully ready to set sail at the point when Pushkin's "Autumn" ("Osen'," 1833) ends.[38] But no ship can escape the myth of Petersburg itself, and not only because of the city's

[38] Aleksandr Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 10 vols. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1977–79), 3: 246–48.

historical association with ship-building. Krivulin's writings show how the city imprints its history and its destiny on any self-image that poets care to create, and they show as well that poets are inevitably caught between the temptations of stillness and movement. All the longing in the world for the eternal cannot lift the poet fully out of temporality, but the reverse is true as well: to be caught in the present or the past of this city is to see the dream of the eternal unfold daily before one's eyes.

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